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ABSTRACT

Voucher plans are proposed because the public schools are perceived to be failing too many students. The use of vouchers is suggested as a threat to low-achieving schools, although it is not always clear where the responsibility for failure lies. The school and its administrators may not be doing all they could, or the public may be to blame for withholding funds to provide quality schooling. As a first step, there must be better ways of determining if the schools really are failing their students than merely relying on the results of standardized tests. The prosperity of the United States during the 1990s may have resulted from the good job the schools have been doing. The real reasons for low achievement must be determined. If the public schools were funded adequately, there would be little or no talk of vouchers. (SLD)

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Assessment of the Voucher Plan of Instruction

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ASSESSMENT OF THE VOUCHER PLAN OF INSTRUCTION

Vouchers seemingly have become an issue for very strong debate. Emotions tend to remain high in the discussion. There are pros and cons to the voucher system. Advocates believe it is an avenue for students in poor performing schools to transfer to a school in which students are achieving more optimally. Thus, the blame is placed upon teachers in the school to have all achieve at an effective level, regardless of other variables involved such as low socio economic level areas. Lower socio economic area schools have always achieved at a much lower rate as compared to suburbia with its high income areas. Generally, low income schools are targeted as having failed to provide the education necessary for a student to be successful now as well as in the future. What are selected issues in having voucher schools?

Issues in Voucher Plans

If one variable is the cause for student failure in a school, such as low quality instruction, then the voucher system makes sense. Vouchers if implemented provide an alternative to public school education and, especially, in low performing schools. In addition to poor performance of a student in a school, advocates of vouchers provide a plethora of additional advantages. These include the following:

1. parents are presented a choice as to where to send their offspring to school. In a democracy, parents need to be able to choose and select the school/teacher best able to provide for their child.
2. parents should be able, too, to choose whether a secular or denominational school would best meet the learner's needs.
3. parents are responsible ultimately for their offspring's behavior and achievement.
4. parents should make choices for the child's education as they do for items selected and purchased at the market place.
5. parents, in numerous cases, believe that students achieve at a more optimal rate in private, rather than public schools. The media has extolled the virtues of private school education (Ediger, 2000, Chapter Two).

Disadvantages of vouchers are the following:

1. the courts have ruled rather consistently in the separation of church and state. Most private schools are denominational with emphasis placed upon tenets of Christianity.
2. private schools tend not to be set up to teach handicapped students. Handicapped students cost two to three times more money to educate, on the average, as compared to normal children. Many accommodations are made for handicapped students in the public

schools. The most difficult students to teach might then remain in the public schools due to private schools not admitting handicapped learners.

3. most low income families could not afford to send their children to private schools based on the money available, presently, from the sending school. For example if the pubic school, the sending school, spends $5000 per school year per child and this would then go as a voucher to the receiving school which charges $8000 per year tuition, there is a difference here of $3000. In addition, transportation may be a biggy in that the time and money needed to transport a child to a chosen private would not be feasible. Wealthier parents who are currently sending their children to private schools would reap the benefits of receiving vouchers if the voucher plan were implemented. Hardly would these be the needy ones to receive reimbursement for student private school attendance.

4. very little research has be done to compare the effectiveness of voucher versus public school education. Private schools do not need to meet state standards as do public schools. Thus, qualified teachers may not be in the offing in many private schools.

5. there are few protestant private schools. Most are Roman Catholic in religious persuasion. Religious private schools may not meet the needs of numerous parents who desire Protestant private school education for their children (See Ediger, 2000, Chapter Eleven).

Considerations in Student Achievement

Too much emphasis has been placed upon the school and specific teachers doing for students what the home and society has omitted or refrained from doing. The school and school system is only one variable in the total pie. The total environment is involved in educating children. The following need assessment in terms of what parents are doing in the home setting:

1. reading aloud in a stimulating manner to young children, in particular. Oral reading of good library books is one excellent way of helping children to learn to read and read well.

2. giving <u>assistance</u> to children to compete home work, but not doing it for the child.

3. providing for nutritional needs, sleep needs, clothing needs, and safety needs of the child.

4. having the child take part in quality after school programs such as in music, art, dance, recreation/sports, and/or in swimming experiences. Membership in clubs may include Boy/ Girl Scouts, 4H Clubs, and Campfire Girls' organizations. Choices need to be made in after school programs so that the child develops feelings of belonging and yet is not overwhelmed.

5. making certain the child is ready for school and for learning.

Vouchers as a Threat to Teachers and the Public Schools

Too frequently, vouchers are held up as a threat to teachers in public schools. Thus, if students do not achieve at an acceptable arbitrary level, the voucher system will come into being. The following (Education Week, February 21, 2001) is an example:

"Florida schools that faced the threat of vouchers if they failed to raise their student's test scores made achievement gains on state tests that surpassed those of other schools, according to an evaluation of the state's accountability and school choice program.

The report, which was released by the Manhattan Institute and Florida state University, identifies what the author describes as the 'voucher effect' operating on schools facing the prospect of having their students qualify for the publicly funded tuition aid. The affect motivate those low performing schools to make greater gains on the Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test, or FCAT, the study concludes.

Just having an accountability system in place, a system in which performance is measured, that alone appeared to improve performance across the state..."

There could be a plethora of rival hypotheses which may well explain the above named gains "due to voucher threats" including the following:

1. threats to teachers from educational bankruptcy laws, merit pay, performance contracting, and charter schools. These are threats to teacher integrity, not a wholesome way to motivate teacher efforts and student achievement.
2. the implementation of exit tests for high school students whereby a failed student without a diploma might well face an undesirable future.
3. inservice education opportunities which has motivated teachers to improve teaching and learning situations.
4. school administrators who fear being fired from their positions due to students not doing well on state mandated tests. Thus, these principals place pressure on teachers to have students achieve at a much higher rate in test scores.
5. teachers teaching to the test indirectly or directly. An increase in news items has accrued with teachers fudging on state tests due to excess pressure placed on high test scores (See Ediger, 1995, 135-139).

There are a plethora of negative consequences coming from the high standards and high test scores movement, including the following:

1. threats from high stakes testing whereby exit tests are required for student high school graduation. A student who does not receive a high school diploma or its equivalent does indeed face a bleak future. What happens to these "failed students?" With high stakes testing, it is "do or die,' meaning the test has to be passed or the consequences suffered.

2. low validity in tests used due to a lack of quality pilot students Thus, the test does not cover what was taught. Many state mandated standards did not have their tests aligned with each standard. Unaligned tests generally favor the more intelligent verbally inclined students. Thus, an unaligned test may be more of an IQ test as is true of standardized achievement tests. Neither has its objectives for teachers to use as benchmarks in teaching and learning situations. Careful alignment of the tests to the statewide standards must be in the offing in making for higher student test results.

3. drill and more drill for test taking and for the involved test to be taken. The amount of time spent on drill takes time away from other valuable leanings which need to be achieved, such as in art, music, and physical education.

4. what gets tested also gets taught. This can make it so that test scores go up. This situation, however, again minimizes those learnings which are valuable for students, but are not on the test. A major focus on the "basics" then occurs such as in reading, writing, and arithmetic to the near exclusion of science, social studies, the fine arts, and physical education. Balance in the curriculum is necessary so that each area of study receives its fair share of time and emphasis.

5. the state standards become hallowed grounds, and yet who can say that these represent "Eureka, I have found it." State standards vary in difficulty from state to state. Human beings write the test items. Some have not been adequately pilot tested to take out the kinks and weaknesses. It is extremely difficult to write good test items. What seems as a good test item may not be perceived that way the second time around. The question will always be, "What do students need to know and be able to do?" Thus, test taking skills will not be important in securing a position at the work place nor in its maintenance. Other learnings are much more important!

5. state written mandated tests and standardized tests used on the state level to reveal achievement of learners focus on verbal intelligence only. With emphasis placed upon the basics, especially reading and writing, verbal intelligence should also be on the rise. Verbal intelligence helps in doing better in test taking. Gardner (1993) lists seven additional intelligences possessed by students which need to be emphasized in the school setting, other than the verbal factor.These include the following:

a) visual/space such as art products to reveal what has been

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achieved in any curriculum area.

b) logical/mathematical involving use of logic in reasoning and mathematical knowledge.

c) musical/rhythmic. Many curriculum areas provide opportunities to show what has been learned through music and/or dance in its diverse manifestations. Thus, for example, there are songs written in different historical periods of time which reveal subject matter in the lyrics as well as in rhythms such as folk dances in place (geography).

d) intrapersonal in which a student reveals strengths in what has been learned on an individual basis.

e) interpersonal includes those learners who best indicate learning through a cooperative endeavor.

f) bodily/kinesthetic emphasizes those activities involving athletic and physical prowess. Thus in historical units of study, a student may reveal achievement through showing and playing games which were played a an earlier period of time.

g) there are students who are strong in being objective thinkers abut subject matter learned. They tend to leave out biases, prejudices, and dogmas from their trend of scientific thought. The academic discipline of science, too, is liked by these students and achievement here will be developmentally high.

A broadly educated person then would receive adequate time and attention for each of the above named eight intelligences. Those possessing the most strength may then be used to indicate that which has been learned.

Should schools not focus on self concept development within students? Instead of seeking how many students to fail and hold back each school year, perhaps, more stress should be place upon each student learning as much as possible and still being successful. With news of calamities occurring when students fail to achieve and possess positive feelings, such as Charles Andrew Williams, among others, (Kirksville Daily Express, March 6, 2001), perhaps more emphasis should be placed upon the affective dimension of student achievement. Williams shot to death two high school students and wounded thirteen others in Santanna High School in San Deigo, California. He was short in stature and ridiculed by peers in high school. Williams, age 14, will be tried as an adult, the tragedy of a life wasted! Additional shootings and threats of shooting have occurred since that incident, such as at Bishop Neumann High School in Williamsport, Pennsylvania. This time a female student shot and wounded at least one student (March 7, 2001).

Too frequently, all emphasis of student achievement is placed upon the cognitive dimension, involving the academics. Legislators, governors of states, and the President of the United States believe very strongly in testing to measure cognitive learning only. With state

standards and machine scoring of tests, it is easy to give a student's achievement in terms of a numeral such as a percentile. But does that single percentile "tell it all of a learner's progress?" A good self concept is vital for students to develop and possess.The home has a serious responsibility here in that students do not come to school in readiness such as having physiological, safety, belonging, and esteem needs met (See Maslow, 1954). Teachers and administrators need to appraise how well the home is doing in each of the five above named categories by using a five point Likert Scale. Conferences involving parents and teachers may provide time to inform the former how well the home is holding up on responsibilities toward educating the whole child. In an era of accountability in teaching, the parents and the home need to shoulder responsibilities to help the learner do well in school.Welfare agencies, for example, may be contacted if the home cannot afford meeting clothing needs of an offspring. There are numerous organizations in society which provide assistance here and in other facets of need, including food needs.

Perhaps, the learnings which cannot be measured are the most important for any student; these include caring for others, morality and decency, being responsible, and accepting others positively. Possessing these unmeasurable traits are much more salient as compared to the academics.

Miller (2001), in an article entitled "Scholars Say High Stakes Tests Deserve a Failing Grade, wrote

Texas is one of at least 27 states that use the results of standardized tests to make so called high stakes decisions, to hold students back a grade or withhold their diplomas; or to punish teachers, principals, and schools that perform poorly. During his presidential campaign, George W. Bush boasted about Texas' record of holding students and educators accountable for failure; now he proposes withholding federal aid from schools that consistently flunk...

Reasons given for rejecting standardized tests in determining student achievement are the following:

1. they measure imprecisely in that scores vary from day to day based on their health, mood, or even what they ate for breakfast. Further more, it is difficult to keep examinations consistent from year to year. Test designers must constantly refresh the test questions, but the new items are never precisely comparable to the old ones. That's why designers publish the margin of error.
2. the apparent increase in test scores, in Texas, was actually due to the exclusion of increasing numbers of students, especially black and Hispanic students.
3. teachers learn to teach to the test. When new tests are introduced, students do poorly initially as compared to later scores of

students from the same test. Why? Teachers learn to teach to the test.

4. students become alienated from school due to seeing/hearing about those who fail the tests as well as the anxiety from possible failure they may preclude.

5. time spent on drilling students to take tests which takes valuable time away from more enriching and challenge experiences in school.

Perhaps, the major weakness of students taking standardized tests is their weakness in validity. These tests do not measure what students have had chances to learn. What is on the test then, in many cases, has not been learned by students through no fault of the teacher. The teacher has no way of knowing which subject matter items will be taught due to no accompanying objectives for the standardized test. If objectives were available, then the teacher has benchmarks to use for teaching. If the standardized test, too, were aligned with the objectives, then validity in testing would be in evidence.

Conclusion

Better documentation with improved testing needs to be there to confirm if pubic schools are/are not failing students. Also, test evidence needs to confirm if students in failing schools are there due to low socio economic levels. Vouchers are presented as a threat to the pubic schools due to too many schools are failing students. Then too, is the lay public and school funding making for failed schools? Low income areas have the lowest paid teachers, the poorest quality school buildings, the least wholesome environments, and the highest crime and danger rates. Vouchers may be used as a threat to have low achieving schools shape up, but who is not shaping up? The school with its teachers and administrators or the lay public in withholding funds for emphasizing quality schooling. Education Week (February 14, 2001) has a series of articles on "State Budget Woes Hits Schools in Deep South," but this is typical in the nation. States cannot fulfill promises to schools for decent school buildings/equipment and to teachers for increased salaries due. This is at a time when President George W. Bush is advocating a $1.6 trillion Federal tax cut which will largely go to the very wealthy in society. It is an across the board tax cut. With the prosperity in the nation during the 1990s, teachers and the public schools must have truly done an outstanding job of educating. Which person living in another nation on the planet earth would not like to live in the United States? Do other professions in the nation do as well as the profession of teaching, especially with its low salaries? If pubic schools were adequately funded, there would be little/no talk of vouchers (See Ediger, 2000, 399-411).

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